

EDUCATION



Funeral Service Education: Transferring Academics from the Classroom to Practical Application

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Recently I heard from a former student who related a situation she and another former student dealt with in working with a “difficult” family. She and her co-worker stated that they used the “WWMD” (What Would Mullins Do?) method, which they apparently utilize often. This was both a great and frightening honor. “Did it work?” was my reaction. She surprised me with a response in the affirmative, stating that they had been able to satisfy the family and meet their needs.

Teaching is more than pouring information into a student’s mind and hoping he/she will be able to simply “regurgitate” it at the proper time. Quizzes, tests, comprehensive exams, and State and National boards are ultimately how students receive a grade. However, if they leave my classes without taking personal ownership of the attributes of a funeral director, I have not succeeded. The ability to take theory and put it into practice is something that must be modeled. While those skills may be inherent in some individuals, there is still the need to more fully train and develop future funeral directors along those lines.

If the goal of funeral service is merely to provide products, fill in the death certificate, write an obituary and get a contract signed, then nearly anyone could do it. If, on the other hand, the goal is to provide a holistic experience - meeting families’ physical, emotional and spiritual needs - then we must include another step. To

accomplish this, we must provide academic training through courses like “Psychology of Grief” or “Funeral Service Counseling.” Practically speaking, the information learned in these courses can provide some of the imperative intangibles that make all the difference to the families we serve. I have learned that before my students can put these key characteristics into practice, they must have experienced them firsthand.

The intangibles mentioned include the following:

Acceptance

This is the ability to meet people where they are, not where we wish they were. In funeral service we would love to serve families who arrive on time, make quick business decisions, and have an unencumbered visitation, a traditional funeral, and simple graveside service. We would like them to have all the necessary statistical data, contact information, be familiar with our policies, and work with us in a pleasant, business-like manner.

But we all know this ideal family doesn’t exist. The student who is always early, academically trained, able to study, and sensitive to those around him or her is just as rare. The students are just as unique as the families they will serve. I must be able to assist them in getting where they need to be. Taking them as they come to class, providing a positive role model, and offering

hope goes a long way on their journey to completion. And while it sounds a little utopian, most of us do it without a conscious thought. We offer:

1. **Respect** – All students will be treated the same, under the same classroom policies and institutional guidelines. These policies exist for the benefit of the whole. I will not, although it is sometimes difficult, transfer a student's previous mistakes from one quarter to another, thus giving him or her a chance to grow and develop academically and professionally.
2. **Patience** – The students need to know that those around them are from various backgrounds, disciplines and experiences. They also need to realize that they are all here for different reasons. Some wish only to embalm, and some only to be funeral directors. Some have experience, some do not. Some will have difficulty in certain subjects, some will not. Patience is an attitude that needs to be modeled. When I am patient with my students, they learn to be patient with each other and, by extension, with the families they will serve.
3. **Practice** – Approaching each class as a “group therapy” session is more fun than approaching it as an academic requirement. Finding creative ways to allow the students to express their thoughts on a subject, both positive and negative, without taking it personally is always beneficial. This often leads to rich discussions that reveal the heart of funeral “service.” Whether this is done in a review fashion, or as a way of introducing new material, it is always challenging to think of new ways to get the class's attention and keep them focused.

Presence

This might also be called undivided attention. Regardless of what might be happening in a funeral director's life, or behind the scenes at work, each family must believe they are the most important thing while they are being served. From the first phone call until the completion of after care, a good funeral director will not be perceived as distracted, preoccupied, or inattentive. Even if serving many families at once, each family must know without a doubt that their needs and concerns are paramount.

This same attitude must be reflected in the classroom. Each student must feel as if they are of paramount im-

portance. Whether they are asking questions or day-dreaming, they must realize that I am alert to their position and willing to respond. Approaching a class with the concept that “a certain amount of information must be given” will lead an instructor to be self-conscious and self-centered. At the end of the day the instructor may have met the requirement, but was the information absorbed? An others-centered approach will constantly monitor the situation to see if the material is being understood. Suspending a lecture for a few moments to get some feedback may actually help certain students refocus.

This attitude should also extend outside the classroom, with instructors keeping themselves approachable at all times while in the office. A scheduled or unscheduled meeting goes a long way in building this attention. In the “quick pass by” situation, I will usually ask the student to begin the next class discussion with their concern, since others may be struggling with the same concept. In more private meetings, I usually delve into deeper issues, realizing that the student's academic difficulties may be based on outside distractions. Either way, these classroom questions and concerns must be met in order for that student to move forward.

Listening

Funeral directors are not counselors in the legal sense but may be considered “professional listeners.” During the first call and arrangement conference, information must be obtained. The way in which this task is approached is a learning process. Often, needed information can be obtained in a reasonable amount of time by simply stepping back and letting the family breathe or weep for a few moments. It should always be remembered that the arrangement conference should not be seen as a distraction from the service but as a part of the helping and healing process. The family is not being pushed to put the death behind them but to simply begin the journey to healing. While stepping back may mean that we hear the same stories again and again, this process can often be a goldmine of statistical and personal information. Opportunities like this can be a great help if the funeral director will only take the time to be quiet and listen.

This is something we teach, but is it something that can be practiced with the student body? Most of us are fortunate if we actually get through the material according to our academic calendar. Every class is important,

and our time must be managed with the utmost care. Could it be, though, that a student would say something in class that may assist another, or guide us in how to present the information in various ways for the benefit of all students? Is there sometimes some validity to their frustration and lack of understanding? Recently I came to a sad realization. I had been having students outline certain portions of their textbooks – a technique I had been taught and had used myself for many years. However, I was having discouraging results in getting them completed in the format requested, if submitted at all. One student finally told me that he had never been required to read and outline a text. I found that this was the general consensus in the classroom, which caught me off guard. In subsequent work with several students, we have come to an agreement that creating a workbook for the reading assignments is a better tool.

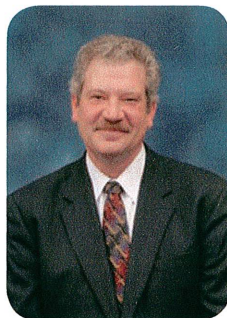
Guidance

In a proverbial sense, funeral directors take people by the hand and walk them through a process they never wanted, to discuss things they would rather not discuss, and bring them out on the other side without adding to their pain. Done properly, this process can even bring a sense of relief to grieving families. A gifted funeral director will serve as a guide along a path the family has never traveled before. He or she will prepare them ahead of time for the twists and turns that are coming, giving them information as it is needed that will help them get through the next step. Some of these steps might be as simple as letting them know that the day of the funeral will be a long day and they should try to get some rest and eat well the day before. Or it might involve warnings about what they might experience at the closing of the casket or while lowering their loved one into the grave.

Many students come into programs knowing what they want – a degree or certificate – but having no idea what that actually entails. Adapting to the necessary sacrifices of studying, attendance and self-denial will be new to some. These students will need more of a push, or pull, depending on their personalities. Some will continue to practice the same study methods and have the same average outcomes. Some will try different avenues and fail several times until they discover the method that works for them. A good instructor will guide them through this process by providing tips or potential strategies for success either during lecture or one-on-one.

When a student approaches me regarding a lack of success, I ask two simple questions. The first is, “What is going on in your life?” This lets me know if this is an academic or personal issue. The second is designed to discover their study methods for the test in question, or research steps in preparation for a written assignment. This information gives me all the fodder I need to begin correcting the process. Upon hearing that they use poor study habits like last-minute studying, studying in bed, staying up all night, watching television while studying and so on, I can begin to guide them to better methods. This is the pull that some students need. If that fails to work, I try to find a way to give them a push in the right direction, sometimes teaming up with a fellow staff member.

When a family walks into a funeral establishment, they are looking for someone they can trust, not just with their deceased loved one, but with their hurts, fears, and desires. When greeting students during enrollment, a perceptive instructor will notice many of the same characteristics, fears, desires and concerns. How can I expect them to excel at their careers if I do not model the characteristics necessary for their future success? How can I ensure that academic lectures regarding counseling and grief will become part of their everyday practice? Only by treating my students as a funeral director would serve a family can I help them make that transfer. This does not mean that we will always come to the perfect solution, but it does give us the advantage of mutual understanding. Hopefully they will remember when that “difficult” family walks in the door that they once experienced similar feelings. With that, I hope that they remember that then someone accepted them and made a difference in their lives.



Brian C. Mullins (M.Div.), Instructor/Director of Learning Skills Improvement, Dallas Institute of Funeral Service teaches on the Arts side of the curriculum. He teaches Funeral Service Administration, Funeral Service Management, Funeral Service Sociology, Funeral Service History, Written Communications, Funeral Directing, Counseling and Psychology of Grief. He has been active in funeral service for 15 years and pastored churches for 20 years. His delight is focusing on “people skills.”